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ABSTRACT

Although arguments abound concerning school administrators' roles, there is common agreement that principals experience difficulties in prioritizing the numerous demands on their time. In addition to crisis management skills, outstanding administrators exhibit five characteristics identified in an earlier paper. The present paper focuses on effective leaders in language minority schools and is based on two assumptions: (1) principals in these schools need additional knowledge and skills and (2) these schools differ significantly from regular schools. The paper sets the background for discussing administrators in language minority schools, rather than presenting a detailed analysis of multicultural education dynamics. After briefly discussing multicultural schools and immigrant populations in the United States, the paper advocates standardized student achievement tests as the best guideline for measuring school effectiveness. The ensuing discussion is based on interviews with administrators and McCleary's characteristics of good principals. Principals interviewed shared at least five common characteristics: (1) a conflict or crisis that brought them to their present position, (2) high levels of job satisfaction, (3) high involvement and familiarity with classroom occurrences, (4) a strong mission and commitment to bilingual education, and (5) an understanding of the complex issues involved. (MLH)

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Translating the Task:
Administrators in Language Minority Schools

Thomas Batsis

1987

Few educators dispute the complex task faced by school administrators. Although arguments abound concerning the approach or role of school administrators, there is common agreement that principals have a difficult job attempting to determine the most pressing concerns among the multitude of conflicting demands made upon their time. The daily routine of a principal has been documented as one of going from task to task in a somewhat hurried and haphazard manner, seldom allowing large periods of time for a specific matter (Bridges, 1978). It is interesting to note that in a structure emphasizing blocks of time devoted to the systematic treatment of specific subject matter, the administrator seldom if ever has large amounts of uninterrupted time to devote to a task. The problem facing most administrators is to respond to the latest crisis or

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difficulty.

A previous discussion (Batsis, 1985) identified five characteristics of outstanding administrators. While these characteristics were viewed as applicable to school leaders irregardless of setting, there is ready acknowledgment that specific venues may require additional skills of the truly effective principal. Thus, the focus of this present discussion is on effective leaders in language minority schools. One assumption is that principals in these settings need to be equipped with additional knowledge and skills in order to be most effective. An additional assumption is that these schools differ significantly from their non-language minority counterparts.

This discussion will briefly focus on language minority schools and then consider the skills required of administrators in these schools. Other readings in this text present a more detailed discussion of the dynamics involved in multicultural education. To say that the issue is fraught with controversy is to understate the obvious. Our purpose here is not to give a detailed analysis of this issue, rather it is to set the background for a discussion of administrators in such schools.

Multicultural schools are not a new phenomenon on the American education scene. Just as the United States has been referred to as a 'melting pot', so schools in the past reflected the ethnic and cultural diversity of the peoples

seeking their home here. The period of the midtwentieth century witnessed a decided decline in the number of immigrants, followed by a resurgence in these populations. The suggestion of a parallel between the immigrant population issues of the past and present would not be met with enthusiastic agreement (Katcher, 1980). Otheguy (1982) in a thoughtful critique of bilingual education presents a withering appraisal of such thinking. He also questions the "...public school's success in rapidly assimilating the immigrant child...," noting instead "...that [this] child was in fact more often working in a shop than learning in school" (p. 306).

The recent immigrant population influx has been so dramatic that within the next few years minority students will become the majority population in California schools (Glascock, 1986). No single ethnic group will represent the majority of students enrolled in schools within the state. There can be little doubt that this situation will have a profound effect on the education system.

The prospect of large numbers of minority students making their way into schools raises questions concerning the types of programs best suited to their needs. This issue invariably leads to questions concerning bilingual education programs. Currently, a debate rages over the value of and approach to bilingual education. Solorzano (1984) concludes that the quest for a single best solution

may prove futile. She suggests that a variety of approaches will probably emerge.

There are those who question any utilization of bilingual/multicultural programs, arguing for the assimilation of non- and limited-English speakers into the mainstream of American society in as timely a fashion as possible. These critics maintain that language is a unifying factor in society and, therefore, nothing should be done to impede the process of English language acquisition (Ridge, 1981). Obviously, these critics see bilingual/multicultural programs as blocks to this assimilation process.

The purpose here is not to debate the merits of bilingual programs. Rather the goal is to explore the dynamics of milticultural schools, focusing on the roles of educational leaders in promoting effectiveness in these learning environments. It appears evident that schools with significant minority enrollments identified as being effective have a firm commitment to bilingual education and actively promote such programs within the total school setting. More will be said about this point in a later section.

In attempting to determine what constitutes an effective school researchers have often turned to measures of school effectiveness. School effectiveness has been evaluated on the basis of student achievement as measured by

standardized test instruments. Madus, Kellaghan, Rakow, and King (1979) critique this approach and argue that such measures are far from sensitive in their ability to identify effectiveness. Be that as it may, while acknowledging the problems in using this approach to identify effective schools, it has received general acceptance. Therefore it will be the guideline adopted here.

The types of schools being described here are schools composed of significant numbers of students who do not speak English or speak English on a limited basis (LEP). While students in these schools come from varied cultural backgrounds, they share the experience of not having English as their primary language. They return home each day to a setting where another language is spoken and other cultural norms are reinforced. The questions facing schools in attempting to respond to these students' needs are complex and, as the previous discussion has indicated, controversial.

Acknowledging the complexity and controversial nature of this issue, the question being addressed here concerns the ways principals of effective schools respond to the needs of language minority students. Part of the research for this discussion involved interviews with administrators of effective language minority schools. A particular focus in the interviews was characteristics of these principals that might distinguish them from administrators of non-language minority schools.

McCleary (1983) identifies several characteristics of principals in settings comparable to the ones being described here. Some of the qualities shared by these administrators are: (1) having spent a number of years rising progressively through the ranks, yet arriving at the principal's position as the result of some crisis or conflict; (2) feeling very satisfied with their current position; (3) being very involved with the teaching staff; (4) seeing themselves as leaders, not managers; and (5) concerned about and involved with the future direction of education.

The principals described by McCleary and those who were interviewed for this discussion share common characteristics. Invariably there was some type of conflict or crisis that brought them to their current position. For example, one principal was brought in as a solution to serious conflict that had arisen between the previous administrator and the faculty. An elementary school principal was assigned when the school board determined that a significant change in the school's student population required new direction to address these students' needs.

The principals invariably reported high levels of job satisfaction. Acknowledging that conflict was unavoidable in the day-to-day operation of a school, they nonetheless appeared genuinely enthused about being a principal and could identify specific aspects of their job that brought a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Watching these principals walk through the school reveals their involvement with the people who make up the school community. These administrators ask questions of faculty indicating a high degree of familiarity with what is occurring in individual classrooms. For example, it is common for the principal to ask how a particular student is progressing in a given subject area. In addition, observations of principal-teacher interactions indicate a high level of administrator involvement in the academic program.

"People with a mission" is a good way to describe these principals. They relegate the management notion of school administration to a minor position and clearly identify their role as educational leaders. While acknowledging that school administration involves paperwork and schedules, these principals see themselves as guiding the overall direction of the school.

McCleary also discusses the concerns these principals have about the future of education and their role in setting this direction. The important point here is that these principals focus on the role of education in general and not just on the impact of their school within the community. They are concerned about this impact, but they also are able to see their school within the larger picture of education.

In interviewing principals of langauge minority schools one clear impression that emerges is the sense of commitment

these administrators have to bilingual/multicultural programs. Bilingual education is not just another program, rather it is an integral part of the school and permeates all facets of the curriculum.

Of equal importance is the technical knowledge these principal demonstrate in discussions of language minority schooling. Effective principals do not have just some vague sense of commitment, rather their commitment derives from an understanding of the complex issues in language minority programs. Teachers in effective schools have a real sense of a dialog between themselves and administrators. Teacher and principal speak the same language.

Carter and Chatfield (1986) demonstrate how vital this type of thinking is for a truly effective school. Their case study of Lauderbach Community school shows that the priority accorded the bilingual program positively impacts student achievement. Further, the authors document the key role played by the principal in guiding this process.

Our discussion here has focused on the principal's role. A school community is made up of teachers, students, parents, administrators, and the larger community surrounding the school. This examination of the administrator's role was not an attempt to be overly simplistic and disregard the importance of other groups, rather it was merely to focus on the part played by principals in effective langugage minority schools.

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